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THE RELATION OF THE ETHICAL TO THE ÆSTHETIC ELEMENT IN LITERATURE.

If we are to understand the function of literature and its relation to life, we must consider to some extent the wider question of the function of art and its relation to life. Poetry, at least, is generally included among the fine arts, and the same reasons will lead to the inclusion of the other forms of creative literature, not only the drama, but that form of prose literature which has recently to a large extent taken the place of the drama, and which will be chiefly in our minds in the present discussion,—I mean the Novel.

We must first distinguish between the Fine Arts and the useful or mechanical arts. Both are productive; but the aim and end of the productive activity is very different in the two cases. The useful arts come into existence in response to the needs of life; their aim is the supply of these needs. In this sense the fine arts, as such, are useless; they supply no need, or at least none of the lower and elementary needs. Their aim is pleasure or enjoyment; the productive activity which they exemplify is not an activity constrained by the necessities of human existence, but an activity as free as the play of the child, and its products are valued not for their utility, but for their beauty, for the æsthetic satisfaction which they give. The distinction between the mechanical and the fine arts is, of course, a distinction of degree, rather than of kind. The former pass into the latter by gradual and almost imperceptible steps. The useful may be also beautiful; and whenever we find this coincidence of beauty and utility, we have passed from the mechanical to the fine form of art. It is no doubt because of this coincidence, as well as because utility, or the adaptation of means to their ends, is itself an element in the beautiful, that Socrates, and others, have held that utility is the secret of beauty. Still we must recognise an added something in every truly artistic product—not mere unmeaning decoration which has no relation to the end which the thing is intended to serve, but a beautiful

adaptation, or the use of beautiful means, to the end in question. The distinction between the mechanical and the fine arts may be said, then, to be that the former are primarily concerned with utility and that the æsthetic interest is always in them subordinated to the utilitarian, while the latter are concerned chiefly, if not exclusively, with the beautiful as such.

It is necessary further to distinguish carefully between the creative and the non-creative, or merely descriptive form of literature, that of science or history, for example. In both we have a representation of Reality; but the representation is in the one case a mere description, in the other an interpretation, an "imitation" of nature, a reproduction of life itself. Science and history are essentially realistic; art—and creative literature alone is art—is essentially idealistic. Science describes the facts as they are; art seizes the truth which the facts only imperfectly suggest, translates the *facts* into *truths*, or shows us the facts as they ought to be, and as they have it in them to become. Thus it is that, in the words of Aristotle, "Poetry is more philosophic and of higher worth than history." It seizes the universal, the typical, the human element in the facts of human experience, and uses the particular facts of that experience merely as the vehicle of this their common truth or meaning. Of all creative literature we may use the words which a great poet has used of poetry—it is "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," it is knowledge consummated and made perfect. Literature is, in another but not less true sense than science, an "anticipation of nature," a fulfilment of her unfulfilled prophecies, a completion of her uncompleted purposes. It is an "anticipation" of *human* nature, a fulfilment of her unfulfilled prophecies, a completion of her uncompleted purposes. Its function is not to describe the facts of the moral life, to re-tell the tale of man's failure and imperfection—it may leave that to the moral analyst, to the biographer and historian—but to discover to us the *truth* of the moral life, its ideal meanings and possibilities.

Literature, then, is not realistic in the sense that it is a mere

transcript of nature, an indiscriminate or photographic duplicate of the facts of human experience as they actually occur; it is not an "imitation of nature" in the sense that it simply "holds the mirror up to nature," or reflects the actual life of man. Its function is to transcend the actual facts, and depict the ideal possibilities; its truth is not the truth of fact, but the truth of idea. Yet there is an element of realism in all art, and an element of moral realism in all creative literature. If the ideal always *transcends*, it never *contradicts*, the actual. Its roots are deep in the actual; that is, the soil from which it springs. We must not confuse the idealism of art with mere romanticism or sentimentalism, the vision of the artist with the dream of the ghost-seer or sickly sentimentalist. As Professor Butcher has expressed it: "In fashioning his material [the poet] may transcend nature, but he may not contradict her; he must not be disobedient to her habits and principles. He may re-create the actual; but he must avoid the lawless, the fantastic, the impossible. Poetic truth passes the bounds of reality; yet it observes the laws which make the real world rational." A true idealism, as opposed to a false romanticism, recognises the inevitable limitations set to human life by its natural environment or external conditions. Romanticism breaks through these limitations, and pictures to us a life emancipated from these conditions, an unconditioned life. Such a life is an unreal and unintelligible life in an unreal and unintelligible world.

Now, the great condition of human goodness is that evil which is the enemy of goodness, but apart from which goodness as we know it would lose its meaning. The moral life is essentially a conflict of good with evil; what we call goodness is the triumph of the good in this conflict. A goodness which is not achieved in this way is not the ideal good of man. Or, to put the same thing in another way, an idealism which disregards the "flesh"; that is, the ordinary desires, affections, and appetites of human nature, condemning these natural human propensities as hopelessly evil and forever inimical to the spiritual life, is a false idealism, is not, indeed, strictly an idealism at all, but a sickly sentimentalism, a fool-

ish and unmeaning romanticism. "From flesh unto spirit we grow"; and all true literary art will recognise and take account of the laws of this growth of the human spirit; that is, will possess ethical truth. Ethical truth means truth to ethical actuality as well as to ethical ideality. In this sense the moral artist must be realistic as well as idealistic; he must reckon not merely with the moral ideals of mankind, but with the conditions of human action and the elements of human nature.

It is doubtless the inevitable reaction from an abstract idealism or an empty and unmeaning romanticism that explains, in part at least, the realistic tendency of current literature. In the words of George Meredith, it is a reaction from the one extreme of "rose-pink" to the other, of "dirty drab." It takes the form of a naturalism which so affirms the influence of the environment or conditions of human life as to deny the reality of moral freedom, which so affirms the reality and the strength of evil as to deny the possibility of goodness, or the triumph of good over evil, which so identifies the moral nature with the "flesh," or natural and animal propensity, as to deny the possibility of any truly spiritual, or properly human, life for man. For the shallow and unfounded optimism of an abstract idealism it substitutes a pessimism which is the result of an equally shallow and one-sided observation and interpretation of the facts of our moral experience. If, then, we are to find deliverance from this realism or naturalism, on the one hand, and from this pessimism, on the other, it must be through a revision of our former naïve idealism in the light of the conditions of our moral experience which realism has emphasised, and through a revision of our former naïve optimism in the light of the facts of human experience to which pessimism has called our attention. To put the matter more concretely, if we would be delivered from the naturalism and pessimism of Thomas Hardy, it can only be through the idealism and optimism of George Meredith. Nor is the method of George Meredith a new method; it is the method of all truly great literature, it is the method of Greek tragedy, it is the method of Dante and Shakespeare

and Milton. The great creative writers of the past have seen no irreconcilable quarrel between idealism and realism, between optimism and pessimism. An idealism which did not take account of all the facts of human nature, an optimism which did not reckon with all the evil of human life, had for them no meaning or value. But a realism which refused to see ideal possibilities in the real, which was blind to the spiritual possibilities in all, even the lowest animal elements of human nature, was equally repugnant to their clear vision of moral truth; a pessimism which ignored the possibility of a triumphant issue of the contest of good with evil, was impossible to their moral faith. Literature is essentially a "criticism of life," a criticism which, being grounded in true insight into its possibilities, condemns alike an idealism which has not incorporated into its very substance all the truth of realism, and a realism which, proclaiming itself to be the whole truth, refuses to be subordinated to the higher truth of what Meredith would call a "philosophic" idealism. For, in truth, as that great literary artist has so forcibly expressed it, in the future as in the past of literature, "rose-pink and dirty drab" are destined alike to pass away . . . the shuffle of extremes . . . where a phantom falseness reigns." "We are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab."

The present tendency to naturalism both in philosophy and in literature is in part, no doubt, the result of the scientific habit of thought which is so characteristic of our time, and which is itself the result of the remarkable advance of natural science in the latter half of the nineteenth century. From the point of view of natural science man is a natural being; but to naturalise man is to eliminate the properly human or ethical element in his nature; to regard him as a merely natural being is to regard him as a non-ethical being. The fallacy of naturalism arises from the ambiguity of the word "nature," which may mean either what man *is*—what he is born *as*, or what he has it in him to *become*—what he is born *to*. It is in this latter and deeper sense of the word that all true literature is true to human nature: it is true to

that nature not in its poor actuality and in its lowly origins, but in the wealth of its ideal possibilities and in the height of its spiritual destiny.

Even so far as literature is inevitably realistic, its realism is implicit rather than explicit; while it may not contradict the laws of human nature, any more than it may contradict the laws of the wider cosmic system to which man belongs; while it must in this sense be scientific, just as painting and architecture must be scientific, it must never confuse its own proper function with that of natural science. The "psychological novel," with its analysis of character reminding us of a treatise on psychology, and still more the pathological novel or play, reminding us of a treatise on criminology or insanity, is not literature, not only because it loses the ideal in the actual, but because it confuses the function of art with that of science. A work of fiction may be very good science and at the same time very bad art—very bad art just because it is such good science. To make the analysis of character, and the discovery of psychological law, the explicit purpose of a novel or a poem is to destroy its literary value; to allow the psychological analysis to become explicit at all is like exhibiting to the audience the mechanism by which stage-effects are produced or explaining to the reader the laws of metrical composition upon which the rhythmic effects in a poem depend. The late Sir Walter Besant may not have been a great writer of fiction, but he at any rate knew well what was legitimate and what was illegitimate in the "art of fiction." "I have never," he tells us in his *Autobiography*, "attempted what is called 'analysis of character.' Most so-called 'analyses' of character are mere laborious talks—attempts to do on many pages what should be done in single strokes and in easy dialogue. If my people do not reveal themselves by their acts and words, then I have failed." With all the great novelists, as he says, "the analysis of character takes the form of presentation by act and word."

The tendency to limit the application of the term "reality" to the actual facts of experience—the tendency to a superficial realism which regards idealism as its contradiction—has

led to the common mistake that literature, being mere fiction, a mere "imitation" or representation of reality, cannot possess the quality of truth. It has led even Plato, in spite of his own poetic nature and in spite of his idealistic interpretation of reality, to condemn the poets, with the exception of a small minority, to exile from his ideal State, as liars, who substitute appearance for reality, and keep men away from truth. The poet's world is three removes from reality, he tells us: it is the copy of a copy, the shadow of the shadow of the real world. Yet the poet makes us believe his lie, makes us take the picture for the thing itself. Now it is obvious that the world of art and of creative literature is a world of imagination, while the world of science and of descriptive literature is the world of actual experience. It is also obvious that the element of illusion is essential. Yet it is no less true, if not so obvious, that the element of fiction and illusion in literature is but the means by which the artist leads us away from the particular and accidental to the universal and essential aspects of human experience, but the finger-post which points the way from appearance and illusion to reality and truth. If we fail to see this, we make literature a mere amusement, a species of witchery and legerdemain whose only service is to beguile a weary hour or to relax and restore our tired intellectual energies by treating us as children with the child's passion for a story and the child's inexhaustible credulity. Nor can it be denied that this childish state of mind is wonderfully long-lived, and that there is a great deal of so-called "literature" which appeals only to this childish taste; but surely true literature always makes a higher appeal and has a higher value—is always marked by that "high seriousness" of which Matthew Arnold speaks, which leads it to use its illusions in the interests of truth. It was because the poets seemed to Plato to interpret their function as mere amusement, because their only end seemed to be to please—no matter by what devices—that he condemned them as not only a useless but a pernicious element in the State.

This Platonic criticism of poetry, or rather of the poets,

raises the large and difficult question of the relation of the ethical to the æsthetic element in literature—the large and difficult question of the true interpretation of the principle, “Art for art’s sake.” In the light of what has been already said regarding the essential idealism, and therefore ethical truth, of literature, it is clear that the principle in question cannot mean that literature is non-ethical or indifferent to moral distinctions. Poetic truth and ethical truth cannot conflict; on the contrary, they must be identical. What the principle does mean can only be that the aim of literature, as of all art, is not to inculcate moral truth, or to influence conduct and character, not to teach or preach, but to please; and accordingly that to estimate its value in terms of its moral influence is to apply to it an irrelevant standard of value. Plato’s criticism of the poets on account of the demoralising influence of their representations of moral badness, and his demand that they shall be allowed to represent only the good, would mean not merely the limitation, but the annihilation of literature. To restrain the poet or the novelist from the representation of evil as well as good, would be to make impossible his representation of goodness itself. But although the freedom of the literary artist must not be restrained by any intrusion of the thought of the moral influence of his work, although he may not compose his work with a moral purpose, it does not follow that the interests of morality are not safe in his hands. If ethical and literary truth are identical, then, even though evil must be represented as well as good, the influence of good literature cannot be demoralising; and a work that represents only evil is no more entitled to be called good literature than a work that represents only good. It is in the interplay of good and evil that the only meaning of good as well as of evil is discovered. To take a recent illustration, it is surely no less a literary or æsthetic than an ethical defect that, in “The House with the Green Shutters,” there is one long monotone of sordid wickedness; as it is at once an æsthetic and an ethical defect in certain recent delineations of the same or similar types of Scottish life and character that they consist of one long-

drawn monotone of insipid and untried goodness. "We are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab." Yet the objection recurs, the aim of literature being merely to please, its influence must be counter to the interests of morality, unless it is restrained by moral considerations. As Plato puts it, if the poets are allowed to pursue their vocation without let or hindrance, "pleasure and pain will have sovereign power in your State, instead of law and those principles which, by the general consent of all time, are most conformable to reason." But does not this insistence upon the inevitable hedonism of literature, as of art generally, overlook the all-important consideration that its function is not merely the production of pleasure or delight, but of æsthetic pleasure or delight? Aristotle, with fine insight, emphasises this essential objectivity of æsthetic satisfaction. As Professor Butcher expresses his view, "the subjective emotion is deeply grounded in human nature, and thence acquires a kind of objective validity. As in ethics Aristotle assumes a man of moral insight (*ὁ φρόνιμος*) to whose trained judgment the appreciation of ethical questions is submitted, and who, in the last resort, becomes 'the standard and the law' of right, so, too, in fine art a man of sound æsthetic instincts (*ὁ καρεῖς*) is assumed, who is the standard of taste, and to him the final appeal is made. . . . The pleasure that any given work of art affords to him is the end of the art. . . . The state of pleasurable feeling is not an accidental result, but is inherently related to the object which calls it forth." The pleasure in question is, in truth, the appreciation of the beautiful, the satisfaction which the beautiful object yields to the æsthetic sensibility; and the morally beautiful is the good.

Literature, therefore, does teach, although its aim is not to teach, but to delight. While it is true that, in the words of Dryden, "poesy only instructs as it delights," Bacon's words are also true, that "poesy serveth to magnanimity, morality and to delectation," and Sidney's, that its aim is "to teach and to delight" or "delightful teaching." And I fancy it was this view of the poet's mission that Plato had in his

mind as the possible "defense of poesy" when he guarded his sentence of exile with the condition that it was not necessarily final. It was not poetry, after all, but the poets—the false representatives of poetry—that he banished; there was another and a truer conception of poetry which his criticism of the actual poets was intended to call forth. "The sentence of exile is to remain in force against poetry until she has made her defense, either in lyrical or in some other measure;" and "I suppose," he adds, "we shall also allow those of her patrons who are lovers of poetry without being poets, to advocate her cause in prose by maintaining that poetry is not only pleasurable, but also profitable in its bearings upon governments, and upon human life: and we shall listen favorably. For we shall be gainers, I presume, if poetry can be proved to be profitable as well as pleasurable."

There is one other criticism which Plato makes on poetry, a criticism which is often made on literature in general, and especially on the novel, from the ethical point of view: namely, that its appeal being to emotion rather than to reason and will, its influence is inevitably subversive of the true relation of reason to emotion, and that, habituating as it does both the author and his readers to life in the world of imagination, and cultivating in them a bad habit of emotionalism which never finds expression in action, it unfits them for action in the real world. Aristotle's answer is that literature *educates* the emotions by purifying and ennobling them, by idealising or spiritualising them. The criticism rests in part upon the false or absolute antithesis, already discussed, between idealism and realism, and in part upon a mistaken and puritanic distrust of emotion. The criticism may be in large measure true of the average novel or play; it may be true also of that excessive interest in art itself which implies deficiency of interest in the practical life and failure in ordinary duty; it is not true of any novel or play which is entitled to the name of literature, or of that sane interest in literature which recognises that, while it ministers to the highest ethical ends, it is only one among other elements of the true life of man, and ought to stand in organic and harmonious relation to all the rest.

The antithesis between literature or art, on the one hand, and life or action, on the other, is no less superficial than the antithesis between action and thought. Even Sir Walter Scott was haunted by this idea, and was in the habit of contrasting the greatness of action with the triviality of literature, or the mere representation of action. And Plato, with all his appreciation of the life of thought and depreciation of the merely practical life, argues with keen humor that if the poets had been fit for any kind of practical service they would never have been allowed to idle away their lives in writing poems, if they had been of any *use* to their fellows, they would never have been allowed to practice the *useless* art of poetry. "Is it conceivable that, if Homer and Hesiod had been really capable of improving men in virtue, they should have been suffered by their contemporaries to travel about reciting?" But surely if we believe in the practical power of ideals, and still more if we believe in the superior value of spiritual to merely material ends, we must admit that, though the sphere of literature is not any more than that of science and philosophy, itself the sphere of action, yet the man of letters, like the man of science, is far from useless, even from the point of view of action, and that the distinction between the useful arts and those which are not useful does not hold when we take into the account those higher uses which have reference to the higher ends of human life. To the best life of the nation and of the individual literature is an indispensable minister; it is a shallow utilitarianism which discovers no utility in it. We may confidently share the conviction of Matthew Arnold that "good literature"—the literature which is characterised by "high seriousness" and a true idealism—"never will lose currency with the world, in spite of momentary appearances; it never will lose supremacy. Currency and supremacy are insured to it, not, indeed, by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper,—by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity."

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